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AUTHOR	Berne, Robert; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Since 1993, school reform leaders from Chicago (Illinois), Denver (Colorado), New York (New York), Seattle (Washington), and Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) have come together in the Cross City Campaign to work for the improvement of urban education. In each of these cities rhetorical pleas for decentralization and the investment of decision making in the school community are common, but central offices continue to yield little real authority to the local schools. This report recommends a fundamental revision of urban public school systems, one that shifts virtually all funds and most authority to the schools and dismantles centralized bureaucratic structures. "Reinventing Central Office" covers six key areas in which centralization can be reduced and local autonomy strengthened: (1) governance; (2) budgets; (3) curriculum and instruction; (4) personnel; (5) facilities and services; and (6) accountability. Large bureaucracies find it hard to change how they work. They may yield authority to schools in some or all of these areas, but they then take actions that show that authority still resides at the central level. Central offices have a strong tendency to recentralize, schools will have to watch vigilantly for possible recentralizations if these reforms are implemented. Communities have the intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and physical strengths that provide the essentials for raising children and revitalizing community life. Four appendixes outline powers and functions that should be shifted to the local schools; list proposed roles for schools, districts, and external groups; and provide lists of resources and individuals with expertise in educational improvement. (Contains 47 references.) (SLD)

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